

Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us:  
The Place of Reason in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

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## Abstract

In making a feeling or sentiment such as sympathy foundational to his ethical analysis Adam Smith appears to set himself on a collision course with those ethical theories in which reason plays a central role. I shall claim, contrary to appearances, that reason has an important part to play in Smith's final account of ethics; that what Smith rejects when he appears to reject reason, is a kind of austere ultrarationalism (à la Cudworth, Plato or the Stoics) that would make reason the original independent source of our ethical judgements; and that, in the end, Smith does not reject reason but rather develops a complex theory of morality which permits reason to play a significant role in man's moral life.

*'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
An' foolish notion'*<sup>1</sup>

## *Introduction*

At first glance, the ethical writings of Adam Smith would seem a most unlikely place in which to find reason recognised as a significant factor in ethical reflection. As a contributor to the Scottish Enlightenment, a student of Francis Hutcheson and a friend of David Hume, Smith should, it seems, if he is to be faithful to his heritage, demonstrate an anti-rationalist bias in ethical matters. That such appears to be the case is supported by the very title of his seminal work in ethics, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*<sup>2</sup>, and is apparently reinforced when one starts to read through the work and discovers that notions such as sympathy are central to his analysis.<sup>3</sup> In making a feeling or sentiment such as sympathy foundational to his ethical analysis Smith appears to set himself on a collision course with those ethical theories in which reason plays a central role. I shall claim, contrary to appearances, that reason has an important part to play in Smith's final account of ethics; that what Smith rejects when he appears to reject reason, is a kind of austere ultrarationalism (à la Cudworth, Plato or the Stoics) that would make reason the original

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<sup>1</sup> From Robert Burns: "To a Louse: On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church, 1786". In an interview in *The Scotsman* (14 January 2009) Robert Crawford remarks that "Burns read Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759, and he knows it well because he refers to it several times. The notorious passage from "To a Louse" is "just a straight versification of something in Adam Smith." Compare Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (hereafter TMS) III.4.6: "This self-deceit, this fatal weakness of mankind, is the source of half the disorders of human life. If we saw ourselves in the light in which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would generally be unavoidable. We could not otherwise endure the sight."

<sup>2</sup> The TMS is divided into seven parts, these parts being indicated by large Roman numerals. The parts in turn are subdivided into sections (small Roman numerals), chapters (Arabic numerals) and paragraphs (Arabic numerals). So I.iii.3.8 signifies: Part One, Section 3, Chapter 3, Paragraph 8. Parts III, IV and V have no sections.

<sup>3</sup> According to the writers of the "General Introduction" to the Glasgow edition of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Smith offers an account of the origin of the rules of morality "which places him in the anti-rationalist tradition of Hutcheson and Hume." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Volume 1 (general eds. R. H. Campbell & A. S. Skinner; textual ed. W. B. Todd), Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 16.

independent source of our ethical judgements; and that, in the end, Smith does not reject reason but rather develops a complex theory of morality which permits reason to play a significant role in man's moral life. The paper that follows begins with an account of Smith's treatment of sympathy (I), traces the emergence of a genuinely ethical dimension in Smith's thought with the notion of propriety (II) and its further strengthening and refinement with the introduction of the idea of the impartial spectator (III). It then goes on to consider the emergence of general moral rules and the place of reason in Smith's ethical system (IV).

### I: Smith the Sentimentalist

Smith's analysis in TMS begins squarely with human psychology. Part I, Section I, Chapter I, is entitled "Of Sympathy" and in it, Smith gives an account of the native and untutored human disposition to experience feelings of a certain kind whenever we witness others in certain situations. Smith combines this psychological account with a robust denial, a denial that echoes similar denials on the part of Hume and Butler, that human beings are ineluctably selfish. (TMS I.i.1.1.) We can and do desire the happiness of others, not merely as means to our own happiness (though if it increases our own happiness so much the better) but for its own sake. The sympathy<sup>4</sup> which we feel when we witness others in distress is engendered not by some mysterious causal connection to their feelings but by an imaginative conception of what we should feel if we were in that other's situation. (TMS I.i.1.2)

There may well be a disparity between what another actually feels in a given situation and what we should feel were we to be in that situation. Our sympathy, then, is not necessarily an identification with what the other actually feels but an imaginative

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<sup>4</sup> Smith's account of sympathy allows it to range over others' joys as well as sorrows—sympathy is thus any kind of fellow-feeling (TMS I.i.1.5) Today, we should probably describe Smith's sympathy as 'empathy'.

projection of what we should feel were we to be in that situation. That Smith's sympathy is clearly counterfactual can be seen in the case of the sympathy we feel for one who has lost the use of reason. A person in this position obviously cannot be rationally distressed; nevertheless, the spectator feels sympathy for him "from the consideration of what he himself would feel if he was reduced to the same unhappy situation, and, *what perhaps is impossible*, was at the same time able to regard it with his present reason and judgment." (TMS I.i.1.11 Emphasis added)

## II: Propriety—from Psychology to Ethics

The starting point of TMS is a kind of psychology but very early in Part I Smith moves from psychology to ethics. While it is a brute psychological fact that we experience feelings in any given situation, and a brute psychological fact that spectators experience sympathy through an imaginative projection of themselves into the patient's place, the question can and does arise as to whether the relationship between the feelings aroused and the situation that arouses them is appropriate. This, for Smith, is where the concept of propriety enters into the picture and it is at this point that we see Smith begin to shift away from the first-person psychological perspective to a third person ethical perspective.

Initially, Smith suggests that the standard of the appropriateness of the patient's feelings in any given situation is whether or not they correspond to the feelings of the spectator. Where there is concord between the feelings of the spectator and the feelings of the patient, there is approval; where such concord is lacking, the spectator disapproves of the patient's feelings. But it turns out that Smith is talking not so much about actual feelings (after all, the spectator may be out of sorts, depressed or unusually elated) but about what the spectator judges that the appropriate feelings *should* be.

Smith imagines himself encountering a man whose father has just died. The bereaved man naturally experiences grief and we, the spectators, approve of his grieving. But Smith notes that we may not in fact feel any particular pain or discomfort ourselves—perhaps we do not know the man or his father. He remarks:

We have learned, however, from experience, that such a misfortune naturally excites such a degree of sorrow, and we know that *if* we took time to consider his situation, fully and in all its parts, we *should*, without doubt, most sincerely sympathize with him. It is upon the consciousness of this *conditional* sympathy, that our approbation of his sorrow is founded, even in those cases in which that *sympathy does not actually take place*; and the *general rules* derived from our preceding experience of what our sentiments *would* commonly correspond with, correct upon this, as upon many other occasions, the impropriety of our present emotions.  
(TMS I.i.3.4 Emphasis added)

The conditionality in this passage expressed by ‘if’, ‘should’, ‘conditional’, ‘not actually’ and ‘would’ is noteworthy. It is not what we in fact *do* feel but what we judge on the basis of general experience we *should* feel that is the basis of the judgment of propriety. The determination of propriety is the result of a judgement, not a mere feeling, and in making that judgement, we have moved from the factual to the normative.

For Smith, the existence of human society requires that sympathy operate in the human heart immediately and without calculation. However, it is not all one way traffic from the spectator to the patient. Just as the spectator tries to imagine the appropriate feelings of the patient, so too, the patient tries to bring his feelings into line with what he imagines the spectator would judge to be appropriate. (TMS I.i.4.7; 8) This produces a tendency towards a kind of equilibrium or, to use Smith’s favourite musical metaphor, a concord. Smith claims that what he calls the soft, gentle and amiable virtues—condescension, indulgent humanity— are founded upon the efforts of the spectator while the great,

awful<sup>5</sup> and respectable virtues—self-denial, self-government, self-control and propriety—are founded upon the moderating efforts of the patient. (TMS I.i.5.1)

A society cannot subsist unless it has laws and unless those laws are generally observed. But the reason we generally act in accordance with justice is not because we have nicely calculated that by so doing society in general will flourish. On the contrary, our resentment of injustice, whether on our own behalf or on behalf of others, is instinctive and particular. “All men, even the most stupid and unthinking, abhor fraud, perfidy, and injustice, and delight to see them punished. But few men have reflected upon the necessity of justice to the existence of society, how obvious soever that necessity may appear to be.” (TMS II.ii.3.9) We are constructed so as to have a natural sympathy with others and they with us, to judge the propriety of another’s conduct inasmuch as he entertains the feelings that we consider appropriate, and to judge the propriety of our own conduct inasmuch as it stands to be approved by the spectation of others.

### III: Conscience<sup>6</sup> and the Impartial Spectator—The Emergence of Reason

But however spontaneous and natural the process of sympathetic projection may be, would not a system of morality based upon such a foundation be irreducibly subjective and boundless variable? Even taking into account the counterfactual element that was noted above, how can we be sure that the consensus of judgements of approbation would in fact target actions that are truly praiseworthy? Enter the Impartial Spectator<sup>7</sup>. “But though man has, in this manner, been rendered the immediate judge of mankind, he has been rendered so only in the first instance; and an appeal lies from his sentence to a much higher tribunal, to the tribunal of their own consciences...” (TMS, III.2.32)

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. awesome.

<sup>6</sup> See James R. Otteson, *Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 66-84.

<sup>7</sup> The Impartial Spectator actually appears for the first time in TMS I.i.5.4.

Sympathetic approbation, then, provides, as it were, only a decision of a court of first instance whose decisions are susceptible to judicial review by a higher court, the court of conscience and the judge sitting in this court is “the supposed impartial and well-informed spectator...the man within the breast, the great judge and arbiter of their conduct. (TMS, III.2.32)

Continuing with his judicial metaphor, Smith contrasts the function of what he describes as two tribunals within the human person; one external, the other internal. The external tribunal relates to the desire for actual praise and the avoidance of actual blame; the internal tribunal relates to the desire to be worthy of praise and to an aversion to being worthy of blame. One can be praised or blamed without in fact deserving either; and one can be praiseworthy or blameworthy without actually being praised or blamed. One tribunal is purely psychological; the other, ethical.<sup>8</sup> The impartial spectator which we have seen described as “the man within the breast” “the great judge and arbiter” is a little later described as “this demigod within the breast”. The task of this demigod is to provide a critical perspective from which one can imaginatively enter into the feelings of another person (or, in the limiting case, oneself), the point of such imaginative projection being to lend a degree of objectivity to a process prone to subjective distortion.

Smith moves even further away from the psychological and subjective elements in his account when he comes to develop his notion of conscience. In a passage that is reminiscent of Butler and anticipative of Newman, Smith asks us to conduct the

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<sup>8</sup> A comical portrayal of the agony of receiving praise which is not one's due can be seen in Preston Sturges's film, *Hail the Conquering Hero*. The inappropriately heroically named anti-hero, Woodrow Lafayette Pershing Truesmith, desires nothing more than to follow in the footsteps of his Marine-hero father. He dreams of returning to his home town to a hero's welcome; unfortunately, he is rejected for service on medical grounds. Befriended by a group of Marines under the command of the redoubtable Sergeant Heppelfinger, he ends up getting the hero's welcome he has always imagined but under false pretences. The praise of those from whom he most desires praise when he knows he has done nothing to deserve such praise makes his hero's welcome turn to dust and ashes.



following thought experiment. “Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity.” (TMS III.3.4)

Pause here for a moment before reading on and conduct the thought experiment that Smith suggests. Call to mind some recent disaster from far away—an earthquake in Haiti or Chile, a tsunami somewhere in Asia—and try to remember what you said, what you thought and what you did. In what way, if any, did the news of this disaster affect your daily routine or your mundane enjoyments? Now, come back to Smith’s account:

[The man of humanity] would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment....And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. (TMS III.3.4)

Callous as it may seem, I suggest that Smith is absolutely correct in his supposition. How could it be otherwise? Were we to be overset by bad news from anywhere affecting anybody we should spend our days in a permanent state of sorrow and distress—but in fact, we can eat our dinners while watching reports of death and destruction on television.<sup>9</sup> Contrast our apparent callous unconcern regarding the faraway disaster with the emotional turmoil brought on by some event, insignificant in the grand scheme of things, which upsets the even tenor of our way. Smith remarks somewhat cynically that

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<sup>9</sup> Smith remarks caustically on the “whining and melancholy moralists, who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery.” A mind so tender of the undoubted if unknown sufferings of others as to be incapable of repose could, Smith says, “serve no other purpose than to render miserable the person who possessed it.” (TMS III.3.9)

if a man were to be told that he would lose his little finger tomorrow “he would not sleep to–night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren... “(TMS III.3.4)<sup>10</sup>

Given this disparity in our reactions to the outlandish outrage on the one hand, and the cosy catastrophe on the other, how should we act if presented with a choice between the two? Smith wonders if a man of humanity would “be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them...to prevent...this paltry misfortune to himself?” (TMS III.3.4) You might expect Smith to answer this question in the affirmative but he doesn’t. But why does Smith think this, given our natural inclination to prefer ourselves and our interests to those of others? It cannot be because of “that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart” that we are capable of resisting our selfish urges. (TMS III.3.4) The emotional impulses of sympathy and benevolence are far too weak to overcome our natural disinclination to favour others over ourselves. Similarly weak is our love of neighbour. What in fact allows us to transcend our self-centeredness is “*a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct.*” (TMS, III.3.4 Emphasis added)

Let us be quite clear about what Smith is saying here. Reason is a stronger force than either sympathy or benevolence. It is reason rather than sympathy or benevolence that brings home to us that as moral beings we are simply one among others, *unus inter pares*, and in no rationally defensible way can we be considered to be more important than any other moral being. If I am the centre of the universe to myself, so too is

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<sup>10</sup> See also TMS II.ii.2.2 and II.ii.3.4.

every other person the centre of his universe. It is reason that “whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us...that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration.” (TMS III.3.4)

Smith’s idea of the emergence of a distinctly moral perspective from a sub-moral context is paralleled in the thinking of a philosopher who is geographically, linguistically and culturally remote from him. The Confucianism tradition recognises four spheres of ethical significance, nested one within the other: the natural, the consequential, the moral and the transcendent.

The natural sphere is the realm of instincts, of unreflective desires and habits, of raw emotions. Here, we operate spontaneously, not according to calculation.

Developmentally, it is the way we begin when we are babies. As a baby, I am the centre of the universe. I want what I want and I want it now. In so far as I recognise other people, they exist only to serve me. While most of us develop beyond this sphere as we mature morally, we never abandon it completely and, in times of stress, we can easily revert to it.

The consequentialist sphere is characterised by a conscious and calculated maximising of self-interest. At this stage, we have learnt to refrain from acting upon our instinctive, spontaneous desires, all the better to achieve them in the long run. Other people, though no longer ignored, are still regarded primarily as means towards the attainment of our goals; now, however, we have learnt to dissemble our self-centred goals so as to manipulate others into helping us to achieve what we desire. What is objectionable here

is not using others as means to ends—it is difficult to see how we could live if we did not do this; think of our relation to bus drivers, waiters, and the like—what is objectionable is using others *solely* as means to ends so that they are fundamentally unrecognised as ends in themselves.

For Confucius, as for Smith, the real breakthrough in moral development comes when we finally realise that other people are not simply helpful or obstructive items in our environment, not simply means to the realisation of our own particular purposes, but are ends in themselves, persons just like us, with their own needs, desires and interests, their own hopes and fears, sorrows and joys, centres of their own moral universes. This insight and its realisation in practice is, for Smith, the achievement of reason, principle and conscience.

#### IV: The Emergence of General Rules and the Place of Reasons<sup>11</sup>

Smith's ideal man is the man of constancy, firmness, wisdom and justice who is ever-aware of the judgement of the impartial spectator. In an anticipation of a typically Kantian theme, Smith believes that the ideal man does not merely conform to the sentiments of the impartial spectator, he actually adopts them. (TMS III.3.25) From our continual observations of the conduct of others, we come to form certain general rules<sup>12</sup> about what is fit and proper to be done. Smith believes that these general rules of morality “are ultimately founded upon experience of what, in particular instances, our moral faculties, our natural sense of merit and propriety, approve, or disapprove of. (TMS III.4.8) It is important for Smith that we remember that approval and disapproval

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<sup>11</sup> See James R. Otteson, “Adam Smith on the Emergence of Morals: A Reply to Eugene Heath”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2000), 545-551.

<sup>12</sup> “Without this sacred regard to general rules, there is no man whose conduct can be much depended upon. It is this which constitutes the most essential difference between a man of principle and honour and a worthless fellow.” (TMS III.5.2)

come first and then the rules emerge rather than the other way around. “We do not originally approve or condemn particular actions; because, upon examination, they appear to be agreeable or inconsistent with a certain general rule. The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of.” (TMS, III.4.8)

These general rules emerge from our social practices of approbation and disapprobation as those are exercised in particular cases. Moreover, these rules emerge from practice without conscious advertence. “Our continual observations upon the conduct of others, *insensibly* lead us to form to ourselves certain general rules concerning what is fit and proper either to be done or be avoided.” (TMS, III.4.6 Emphasis added) The rules are not *constructed* upon some scheme or plan but are rather *discovered* in our practices and are then, applied reflexively to practice. In moral development, both individual and social, this application of rules to practice is secondary and derivative. Smith is rejecting any theory which makes morality, *in the first instance*, a direct intuition of the general nature of the good, whether in Hutcheson’s moral sense (see TMS III.4.5) or in the form of some kind of rational intuitionism. Smith accepts that once general rules have been formed we do in fact appeal to them in our judgement on particular cases: “[The general rules] are upon these occasions commonly cited as the ultimate foundations of what is just and unjust in human conduct” (TMS III.4.11) It is this very practice of appealing to general rules that leads us to think, erroneously, that the rules come first, to suppose that “the original judgments of mankind with regard to right and wrong, were formed like the decisions of a court of judicatory,<sup>13</sup> by considering first the general rule, and then, secondly, whether the particular action under consideration fell properly within its

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<sup>13</sup> His comment on the law is apt in that while, once the common law is up and running, the courts are concerned with the application of existing rules to novel circumstances; however, in the first place, the rules were formed from particular judgements about particular cases and, in fact, are constantly emended in the light of particulars.

comprehension.” (TMS III.4.11) The derivation of the general rules does not detract from reason’s role in ethics.<sup>14</sup> We saw above that Smith believes that only reason has the power to accomplish what neither benevolence nor sympathy can accomplish, name, the ability to overcome the human inclination to self-centeredness.

Smith does in fact reject a certain rationalist conception of ethics but, I believe, the target of his criticism is, for the most part, certain specific classical or contemporary forms of exaggerated rationalism. According to Smith, the ethical doctrine that we have a rational intuitive faculty that enables us to distinguish right from wrong resulted from attempts to confute the horrid doctrine of Thomas Hobbes. “In order to confute so odious a doctrine, it was necessary to prove, that antecedent to all law or positive institution, the mind was naturally endowed with a faculty, by which it distinguished in certain actions and affections, the qualities of right, laudable, and virtuous, and in others those of wrong, blamable, and vicious.” (TMS VIII.iii.2.3) Because the mind was held to exercise this capacity in an *a priori* fashion, our notions of right and wrong must then emerge from reason operating in the same manner in which it makes intellectual judgements: “Since the mind, therefore, had a notion of those distinctions antecedent to all law, it seemed necessarily to follow, that it derived this notion from reason, which pointed out the difference between right and wrong, in the same manner in which it did that between truth and falsehood....” (TMS VII.iii.2.5)

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<sup>14</sup> Smith describes the law-like nature of these rules in a passage whose prose is a startling shade of purple: “All general rules are commonly denominated laws....But those general rules which our moral faculties observe in approving or condemning whatever sentiment or action is subjected to their examination, may much more justly be denominated such. They have a much greater resemblance to what are properly called laws, those general rules which the sovereign lays down to direct the conduct of his subjects. Like them they are rules to direct the free actions of men: they are prescribed most surely by a lawful superior, and are attended too with the sanction of rewards and punishments. Those viceregents of God within us, never fail to punish the violation of them, by the torments of inward shame, and self-condemnation; and on the contrary, always reward obedience with tranquillity of mind, with contentment, and self-satisfaction.” (TMS III.5.6)

Now come a remarkable set of paragraphs that, it seems to me, contain the essence of Smith's thinking on the originative sources of ethics and the place of reason in ethics. (TMS VII.iii.2. 6-9) In these paragraphs, Smith begins by remarking "that virtue consists in conformity to reason, is true *in some respects*, and this faculty may very justly be considered as, *in some sense*, the source and principle of approbation and disapprobation, and of all solid judgments concerning right and wrong." (TMS VII.iii.2.6 Emphasis added) Smith, then, is willing to allow reason some place in the ethical scheme of things. What place, precisely? Just what is it that reason contributes to the process? Reason discovers the general rules of justice; reason forms our ideas of what is prudent, decent, generous and noble.<sup>15</sup> (TMS VII.iii.2.6) How does reason do all this? Initially, at least, by a process of induction from experience, induction, as Smith rightfully remarks, being one

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<sup>15</sup> In her 2004 paper, "Adam Smith's Reconstruction of Practical Reason" *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 58 No. 1, 2004, pp. 81-116, Maria Carrasco challenges the conventional interpretation that sentiments are the foundations of Smith's theory of morals, arguing that his system can be seen as a theory of practical reasoning. Why do many, if not most, commentators think that reason has little or no place in Smith's system? According to Carrasco, largely for historical and contextual reasons. Hutcheson, Hume and Smith all aimed to refute the egoistic theories of Hobbes and Mandeville, and so "discarding medieval theological systems and the implausible (for them) rationalistic theories of some of their modern predecessors (the Cambridge Platonists), sentiments were the natural alternative for these three philosophers." (83) There, however, the similarity between our three philosophers ends. While Hutcheson and Hume proposed "two different sentimental accounts of ethics," Carrasco believes that Smith constructed a system of practical reasoning "mainly through the introduction of the supposed impartial spectator". (83) She argues that "when Smith rejects reason as the foundation of morality, he only rejects theoretical reason, leaving practical reason untouched" and that when he talks of 'sentiments' "he means something much more elaborate than simple emotions." (84) Other works consulted in the course of writing this paper include: J. Bonar, "The Theory of Moral Sentiments by Adam Smith, 1759", *Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1926), 333-353; Maria A. Carrasco, "Adam Smith on Morality, Justice and the Political Constitution of Liberty", *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2008), 135-156; Edward W. Coker, "Adam Smith's Concept of the Social System", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1990), 139-142; Stephen Darwall, "Sympathetic Liberalism: Recent Work on Adam Smith", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1999), 139-164; Douglas J. Dun Uyl & Charles L. Griswold Jr., "Adam Smith on Friendship and Love", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1996), 609-637; Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Norris S. Hetherington, "Isaac Newton's Influence on Adam Smith's Natural Laws in Economics", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1983), 497-505; John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Vol. 2). New York: Dover Publications, 1959; A. L. Macfie, "Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments as Foundation for His Wealth of Nations", *Oxford Economic Papers, New Series*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1959), 209-228; Ellen F. Paul, "Adam Smith: A Reappraisal", *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1977), 289-306; D.D. Raphael & A. L. Macfie (eds.), *Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; David S. Raynor, "Hume's Abstract of Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1984), 51-79; Matthew V. Schertz, "Empathy as Intersubjectivity: Resolving Hume and Smith's Divide", *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2007), 165-178; Amartya Sen, "Adam Smith and the Contemporary World", *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), 50-67; Amos Witztum, "Property Rights and the Right to the Fruits of One's Labor: A Note on Adam Smith's Jurisprudence", *Economics and Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2005), 279-289.

of the operations of reason. “We observe in a great variety of particular cases what pleases or displeases our moral faculties, what these approve or disapprove of, and, by induction from this experience, we establish those general rules. But induction is always regarded as one of the operations of reason.” (TMS VII.iii.2.6) The general maxims of morality thus derived via induction from experience act to regulate most of our moral judgements, what Smith terms “our most solid judgments...with regard to right and wrong”, which, if they were dependent upon sentiment and feeling, would be multiple and various. In this way, then, “virtue may very properly be said to consist in a conformity to reason, and so far this faculty may be considered as the source and principle of approbation and disapprobation.” (TMS VII.iii.2.6)

Given Smith’s reputation as a sentimentalist, this seems to be an extraordinary position for him to hold. Why, then, given these passages, is Smith commonly taken to be arationalist in his ethics? It is clear that he has some deep rooted objection or other to reason’s role in ethics but whatever that might be it is clear that it is not a blanket rejection. What exactly in the rationalist approach to ethics is it that Smith is objecting to? It turns out to be connected with the *point of origin* of the process. Smith is willing to grant that reason is the source of our general moral rules and of the judgments we make in accord with them but he contends that “it is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the *first* perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, even in those particular cases upon the experience of which the general rules are formed.” (TMS VII.iii.2.7 Emphasis added) These first perceptions are not, as it were, deductions from general principles but the matrix in which and out of which our moral notions develop. “These first perceptions, as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling.” (TMS VII.iii.2.7) Smith adverts once again to the role of induction in the formation of moral



rules<sup>16</sup> but denies that reason can, *ab initio*, ground our moral notions: “But reason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake.” (TMS VII.iii.2.7)

This passage contains a description of the operation of reason that seems to reduce reason’s function to the purely instrumental: “Reason may show that this object is the *means* of obtaining some other which is naturally either pleasing or displeasing, and in this manner may render it either agreeable or disagreeable *for the sake of something else*” (TMS VII.iii.2.7 Emphasis added) but, I would argue, this reduction is more apparent than real. What Smith is keen to controvert is the ultrarationalist thesis that reason *alone* is the *original* source of moral judgement not, as we have seen him aver, that reason discovers the general rules of justice and forms our ideas of what is prudent, decent, generous and noble; on the contrary, the roots of morality lie in our immediate emotional engagement: “...nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.” (TMS VII.iii.2.7)

Smith use of the term ‘perception’ in this passage (“the first perceptions of right and wrong”) is revealing. These original perceptions are not purely rational, which is not to say that they are irrational or anti-rational, merely that they are a-rational or pre-rational.<sup>17</sup> It is from these perceptions, however, that reason, through a process of induction, arrives at the general moral rules that Smith admits provide the means by which we moderate and regulate our moral life.

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<sup>16</sup> “It is by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct constantly pleases in a certain manner, and that another as constantly displeases the mind, that we form the general rules of morality.” (TMS VII.iii.2.7)

<sup>17</sup> “The man, however, who deviates from goodness is not blamed, whether he do so in the direction of the more or of the less, but only the man who deviates more widely; for he does not fail to be noticed. But up to what point and to what extent a man must deviate before he becomes blameworthy it is not easy to determine by reasoning, any more than anything else that is perceived by the senses; such things depend on particular facts, and *the decision rests with perception*.” (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross. Oxford University Press, 1980, 1109b22f. Emphasis added.)

As a way of seeing what Smith is about in these passages it might be useful to consider the account of the generation of concepts given by St Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believes that all our knowledge has its roots in our contact with the world through our senses. The original sensory matrix is transformed in time into a perceptual matrix which is prolonged in us beyond the point of actual contact with the world by means of what have come to be called the interior senses—memory, imagination, the cogitative sense and the common sense. Latent in these sensory/perceptual matrices are concepts, the primary purpose of which is, after their abstraction, their re-application to the matrices from which they emerged. Human beings then have no unmediated conceptual knowledge of the world around them. All their knowledge, however conceptually refined it may become, has its roots in sensation and perception. In a similar way, then, Smith appears to claim that our moral knowledge, that knowledge embodied in principles and rules, is inductively derived from a pre-rational experience of human social life to which it is then re-applied.

While it may well be true that the principles and rules are derived ultimately from experience, Smith admits that, once derived, they can and do themselves become norms of judgement. Clearly, in saying that “reason cannot render any particular object either agreeable or disagreeable to the mind for its own sake” and that “nothing can be agreeable or disagreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling” (TMS VII.iii.2.7) Smith is denying something to reason but that something is not any and every role in the process of moral judgement. It might be worth reminding ourselves again that Smith believes that reason, not benevolence or sympathy, is the power by which the human inclination towards self-centeredness can be overcome.

What Smith *is* denying is that we have a primary, rational, intuitive experience-independent insight into matters of right and wrong.

### *Conclusion*

I have argued in this paper that Smith's theory of moral sentiments opposes an ultrarationalist conception of ethics but is consistent with the modified rationalistic theories of some classical and medieval authors. Smith's naturalistic approach is capable of being generalised and extended outside the context of ethics; he himself seems to be aware of this when he says that "The rules of justice may be compared to the rules of grammar." (TMS III.6.11) If morality is taken to be the reflective appropriation of the norms embedded in the practices of human sociability, grammar would be the reflective appropriation of the socially embedded practice of language speaking, and logic the reflective appropriation of the socially embedded practice of argumentation. Seeing this approach applied to the normative elements of language, law and logic—a task well beyond the scope of this paper—could well make Smith's approach to ethics appear less singular and all the more persuasive.